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This week the Board of Supervisors set in motion a focused effort to envision the future of a 275 acre piece of Marin County owned by the State. Currently home to California's oldest prison, the land also supports one of the county's largest employers, as well as its single greatest water user, electricity consumer, and solid waste generator. By many measures, San Quentin is a very active place and that is expected to continue for years to come. But not forever. That's why County Supervisors created the San Quentin Reuse Planning Committee to help us define life after the prison.

It is an ideal time to create a far-reaching vision for this spectacular bayside parcel. Last year, the State analyzed the feasibility of closing the prison and redeveloping the site, acknowledging that their dilapidated, expensive to maintain facility may no longer be the best use of the property. Additionally, Marin County is in the process of updating the Countywide Plan, our guiding land use document. By acting now, the resulting San Quentin concept plan can be environmentally analyzed and included in the updated Countywide Plan when it is adopted in 2004.

San Quentin is an unrivaled candidate to become a world class transit hub. As a ferry expansion site, its deepwater shoreline faces limited environmental challenges or costly routine dredging, while offering speedier service for approaching and leaving boats. It provides a logical terminus for regional rail, seamlessly extending our transit reach to San Francisco, Oakland, their airports, and other job centers around the bay. Given its proximity to the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, San Quentin also offers excellent regional highway and bus access opportunities, not to mention the potential to be a safe, efficient staging area for visitor shuttles headed to West Marin. Two committee members, Supervisor Annette Rose and San Rafael Mayor Al Boro, each well-informed ferry and rail leaders, bring their substantial understanding to our task.

Much like Novato's Hamilton reuse plan, opportunities abound at San Quentin to create a wide range of housing, pedestrian and transit oriented commercial uses, public amenities such as playing fields, shoreline access, windsurfer launch sites, and adaptive reuse of existing facilities for community needs. In truth, the only planning boundaries may be our limited imagination.

With a distinguished committee of innovative achievers I doubt that will happen. Each appointee brings a passion for excellence in their diverse endeavours. Some, like former State Resources Secretary, Huey Johnson, or international business consultant, Stephen Roulac, arrive with first hand global knowledge of stellar community development models. Balancing their perspective, Dana Miller and Alex Amoroso, local residents of San Quentin Village, should insure that the future doesn't overwhelm the present charm current neighbors enjoy. Alex also brings expertise in the Bay Area's housing needs through his job with the Association of Bay Area Governments. Corte Madera and Larkspur Council members will also be vigilant about protecting the existing community fabric. Phil Frank brings an historical understanding of Marin's waterfront, helping us blend long range planning with the region's cultural traditions. Opportunities for all interested Marin residents to participate in the planning have also been designed into the process.

The Board of Supervisors intends for this effort to showcase the principles of sustainability; balancing environment, economy, and social equity. Architect Sim Van der Ryn, a nationally recognized pioneer in energy efficiency and sustainable building, offers his valuable experience. Similarly, real estate developer, Bill White, whose projects incorporate some of the nation's best mixed use, infill solutions can be counted on to keep this planning fiscally relevant. Citizen advocate, Jessuina Perez-Taran, brings with her an impressive record of helping to build inclusive community solutions.

Some may sigh that this will be no more than another in a string of failed attempts to close San Quentin. Such skepticism has its place, but without envisioning a brighter future, the chances of it arriving are dim.

Steve Kinsey is a County Supervisor whose District includes San Quentin. He will serve as chair of the Reuse Planning Committee.